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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0132
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0755
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0092
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0014
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0028
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0053
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0366
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC//DHO-2/REA/NMJIC-J2//
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000394

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)

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TAGS: [EAIR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: LEBAP AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLERS SEEK BREAK WITH
TURKMEN AIRLINES

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.
4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Air traffic controllers in Turkmenabat put forth in a March 21 conversation to PDOFF a litany of complaints of bad management within state airline Turkmenhowayollary (THY) and asked for embassy advice in attempts to found a government agency for air traffic control under the direct management of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov. The two controllers, colleagues at the Turkmenabat airport, explained that reform was urgent because of practices at the company that directly threatened the safety of airplane passengers as well as the security of Turkmenistan,s airspace. The two also expressed a conviction that they faced certain firing if they revealed their views to company management or other government officials -- because air traffic control nets the company most of its revenue. End Summary.

LONG SIMMERING COMPLAINTS

2. (SBU) According to the two controllers, Turkmenhowayollary employs 210 air traffic controllers and about 300 support technicians. These traffic controllers patrol all of Turkmenistan,s air space, in liaison with the military on cases of national security importance. The air traffic component of the company brings in 70% of the company,s revenue, from fees assessed on foreign aircraft overflying or landing on Turkmenistan,s territory. If the controllers were to separate from THY, the company would have to undergo major reform of its pricing system in order to survive. (Comment: Domestic and foreign tickets on THY are heavily subsidized for Turkmenistani citizens and foreigners with diplomatic status; a 40-minute flight from Ashgabat to

Mary, for example, costs about \$2.50, cheaper than a taxi or train ride -- and much faster. End Comment.)

13. (SBU) According to the controllers, despite their significant role, they received second-class treatment when compared to that of pilots at the company, damaging morale to the point that it may adversely affect controllers' performance. This difference in treatment includes opportunities and requirements for training, work hours and benefits. Controllers are required to devote free days to picking cotton during the months of August, September and October) a duty from which pilots are exempt. Controllers are required by their job to speak English in order to effectively communicate with incoming craft, but are not provided the training to attain the appropriate level of English proficiency (Note: One controller attended several weeks of basic English training in summer 2006 but his language level outpaced that of the course, indicating that though in some cases this training is provided, the teaching is not tailored to participants, proficiency. End Note.) Controllers who call in sick run the immediate risk of losing their job because they are seen as dispensible by company management who do not understand the role of controllers; as a result, controllers tend to work even when ill, avoid getting medical treatment at hospital or bribe their medical professionals for a clean bill of health.

14. (SBU) According to these sources, controllers in Turkmenistan patrol a larger area of airspace than their counterparts in other countries) leading to questions of controller effectiveness and air traffic safety. Because of the relatively small pool of controllers, there is often no backup controller on duty at any of Turkmenistan,s airports at any given time. The air traffic monitoring equipment is outdated by international standards, and controllers do not

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receive regular training or technical reviews to ensure compliance with international standards of air traffic safety.

15. (SBU) In terms of general airport conditions, runway length at the airports is insufficient for the planes they accommodate by at least 100 meters and the runways themselves are in poor condition. The small Boeing aircraft in Turkmenhowayollary,s fleet are not engineered to withstand well the frequent 1-hour or 40-minute flights they perform, putting an inordinate and ill-advised degree of wear and tear on the craft; there is also inadequate maintenance of the craft, according to the controllers.

16. (C) The more experienced of the two controllers, a non-ethnic-Turkmen male in his late forties, has been working in the Lebap airport as a controller for over 15 years. In 1991, he successfully appealed to officials in the then Soviet-controlled Government of Turkmenistan to equalize the status of pilots and controllers. As a result of his protest in Turkmenabat) the only one that took place in Turkmenistan on behalf of controllers) all controllers in Turkmenistan and the rest of the states of the Soviet Union were granted the rights of pilots, including retirement by the age of 51, a pay raise, and 70 days of vacation per year.

The two controllers in question believe that most of these employees would support reform of THY to ensure greater autonomy and rights for air traffic controllers, but that most were afraid to challenge the status quo.

17. (C) The above controller said he had been encouraged to speak with PDOFF when the opportunity arose because he had briefly met embassy's DATT when he was in Lebap in late March to assist THY in moving a radio tower. The controller reported that he had asked DATT about embassy sponsored opportunities to learn English (Note: The controller speaks only enough English to issue basic air traffic control commands but cannot converse in English. End Note.) Post is currently helping THY reform its air traffic control practices so that Turkmenistan's airspace can accomodate more

flights.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The controllers, despite the emotion of their appeal, did not appear to have unrealistic expectations of embassy influence over THY, but were hopeful that the embassy might be able to influence the host government should a window of opportunity open. PDOFF emphasized to the controllers that in order for the embassy to have such influence, the host government must first take initial steps to reform THY as a company, rather than treat it as a state social service. Just days after the reported conversation, President Berdimuhammedov appointed a new director of THY, whose intentions vis-a-vis reform still remain unclear. End Comment.
BRUSH